

Strikes That Give the Impression We Are Winning

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“Victory over foreigners calls for praise, victory over Greeks for mourning.” (Gorgias)

Do the general strikes that have taken place since that well-known 14-D [the Spanish general strike of December 14, 1988—translator’s note] in Spain and all across Europe up to the French December of 1995 form part of a revolt against globalization, or are they the clear proof of the evaporation—now we would call it virtualization—of the class struggle? Before responding to this question we shall call attention to something that we could not help but notice about these strikes: the total return to normal on the day after the strike. It seemed that strikes, like witches, are no longer seen anywhere, but since they used to exist they must be there somewhere.

There were neither discussions, nor new organizational processes, nor long-term struggles that would have been evidence of an advance in the consciousness of its protagonists. That is why we are inclined to think that they are not real strikes at all, or else that they ended up not being real strikes, that authentic strikes no longer take place, like the ones of the past. The real question is: How can working class strikes exist today if the working class does not exist, if the workers do not exist as a specific social class? Anyone who tries to explain the present with concepts that are applicable only to the reality of the past, only labors on behalf of spreading confusion and for the preservation of the prevailing order. Perhaps someone will remind us of the spontaneous and autonomous practices of the rank and file movements, of an instance of radicalism, of a particular assembly ... but all of this was without significance, it remained on the terrain of labor, in the sphere of the trade unions, it is necessarily self-limiting and enters into a one-sided competition with the trade unions until it degenerates into just another trade union or else disappears. The illusion of a real workers movement, outside the boundaries of the major trade union federations, can at present be generated only by the trade unions themselves, as an often-utilized maneuver to divert attention for a specific purpose. Today, the condition of wage labor is generalized and, in this sense, almost everyone is a worker, exploited, given orders, dispossessed or contaminated, but this does not mean that they all form part of a historical subject or a class, with a certain predisposition to revolution, a particular historical mission or destiny. It just means that they are numbered among those who “can vote, but not choose”, as J. Estefanía said (a high level executive of *El País*). It is true that there is a remnant class, linked to the old industrial production, that

is, to the previous period of capitalism, that is well on its way to retirement. The one that still displays itself to us in the pathetic parades on the First of May singing “The Internationale”. In any event, a relic from the days before globalization.

“Few things are more symptomatic of the decay of the workers’ movement than its failure to notice this” (Adorno, *Minima Moralia*). When we speak of the proletariat we are referring to that anomalous mass of people—blue collar workers, civil servants, office workers, declining middle class, executives, retirees, unemployed, people on public assistance, youth, etc.—separated from each other by contrasting and divergent material interests and whose only common bond is that of depending on a wage or a subsidy. The development of capitalism has so radically altered the proletarian social structure that the wage earning masses have ceased to be an agent of historical transformation. This unconsolidated social conglomerate cannot be the negation of capitalism. It is in the same situation as the peasantry described by Marx in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*: it comprises an enormous mass of people who live practically identically, but without being united by way of the establishment of multiple interrelations. Their jobs and the modern spectacle isolate them from each other, instead of leading them towards reciprocal relations. At present, the exploitation of labor does not permit any variety of talents, or any wealth of social relations. They live in material conditions that separate them from one another, and if we restrict our attention to the way they live, then in this sense they constitute a class. They are not a class however, insofar as there is no social bond between them, and insofar as the similarity of their interests does not create any community among them, much less a specific organization. They are therefore incapable of defending their alleged class interests, they cannot represent themselves and they have to be represented by an external bureaucratic class. It is from this bureaucratic class that their leaders arise, who they assume are obliged to protect their interests and to decide what is best for them. The political influence of the wage workers finds its ultimate expression in the subordination of society to politicians, that is, to the state and its executive power. The modern proletarian condition, by its very nature, basically serves the bureaucracy whose base of operation is the state, it serves the party of the state, and transforms the wage workers into a conservative force, an agent of order. Their simulated struggles are only a private affair and do not represent general interests. They are nothing but political nullity and boredom because the working class no longer exists in opposition to the dominant system, but forms part of it. The dispensable part.

According to the textbooks, globalization is “that stage of capitalism in which national economies are gradually integrated into the framework of the international economy, so that their development will increasingly depend on the international markets and less on government economic policies”. From the very beginning, globalization was preceded by a generalized reconstruction of industry—the “reconversion” of the eighties—and accompanied by a no less generalized automation of the production process, resulting in the elimination of a large number of jobs and the expulsion of the majority of the workers towards the margins of production or directly into the unemployment line. Globalization has not witnessed the rise of an international proletariat that confronts Capital on a larger battlefield: the entire world. We should ask ourselves how all of this could have been imposed with so little social opposition and how it could have given rise to so few commentaries and rumors. We would have to talk about the degradation of consciousness that led to the inability of the proletariat to carry out its revolution, the failure of its assaults on class society and the effectiveness of the ruling classes, who knew how to address the question of working conditions, that is, by making them

worse, playing with petty political and trade union privileges without arousing any insuperable opposition. One way or another, the proletariat is dissolving into an amorphous mass, without rights and badly paid, of part-time, temporary and unemployed workers, a simple domestic servant of production, the reserve army of labor against itself. Furthermore, the machines, having been designed by experts, are beyond the control of the workers, so that strikes have less and less impact on an unusable and inaccessible system of production; we could say that this is the end of the proletariat, that the proletariat has died. And what has been born is a class of servants “whose sole office is fatuously to wait upon the person of their owner, and so to put in evidence his ability unproductively to consume a large amount of service” (Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class*). Today’s wage workers are incapable, by virtue of their situation, of creating an organized autonomous movement, and the old workers and civil servants will only get involved in a corporative movement. But someone may object, and say that there really were general strikes. Not at all; they were simply demonstrations of the capacity for control exercised by the trade union apparatus that took place because the process of the homogenization of labor was being implemented unilaterally and had affected some of the trade unions’ prerogatives.

Capital and wage labor are just two aspects of the same social relation and one grows in pace with the other. The increase in labor, however, does not necessarily imply an increase in the number of workers. Thanks to the development of autonomous technology, the demand for labor by no means corresponds with the demand for workers. “For capital, the worker does not constitute a condition of production, but only labor. If this can be performed by machinery, or even by water or air, so much the better” (Marx, *Pre-Capitalist Economic Formations*). The old revolutionary demand for the abolition of labor is realized and turned against the workers. Capitalist society is based on the exploitation of wage labor and labor that is not carried out by machines is what is disappearing from the stage of history. So those in power are now talking about sharing the work that remains. From Clinton’s advisors to the critical sector of the CCOO, the constant refrain is a shorter workweek, part time work, make-work projects, work in alternating periods, the return to piecework, etc. Measures that are intended to dissimulate the fact that the future will bring about the near-extinction of wage labor and this, under the existing conditions, implies over the short-term the pauperization of the majority of humanity. A whole urban underclass has appeared, warehoused in ghettos, composed of those who are not capable of being integrated into the market, the excluded, the marginalized, the really poor, rejected and forced to remain on the margins of the economy and yet in the heart of abundance. They comprise a mass of test-subjects for other kinds of economics and politics devoted to making poverty profitable, since poverty has come to stay. For the first time in history, the powerful do not need enormous masses of working class people. The masses exist in excess. They are superfluous for the market. On the other hand, labor is the sole value of modern society, which is a society of workers. Society does not recognize any other kind of activity more noble and meaningful in whose cause labor would deserve to be liberated and there is no longer any social group that is the bearer of other values, on the basis of which it could restore the other human capacities. “What we are confronted with is the prospect of a society of laborers without labor, that is, without the only activity left to them. Surely, nothing could be worse” (Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*).

Marxism’s weakest point was the identification of the proletarian revolution with the economy. With the automation of production the main productive forces are the machines; the proletariat was soon revealed to be an unnecessary class. The part of it that serves as capital is constantly diminishing. The productive forces and the mode of production are no longer in conflict with

one another. What comes out of the factory is no longer the product of the collective labor of a large number of workers; no one can say: "We made this ourselves, therefore it is ours". Production loses its social character. Thus the conflict that resides in the heart of society, between social production and capitalist appropriation, disappears, and does not correspond to the antagonism between workers and employers, that is, it no longer adopts the form of the class struggle. Therefore, "socialism", whatever that may be, is no longer "the necessary outcome of the struggle between two historically developed classes" (Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*). There is not, and there never will be, a crisis caused by this conflict that would provide a framework of action to a working class that is increasingly indistinct, which, driven forward by objective historical necessity, carries out its revolution and emancipates society from servitude.

With the globalization of the economy, the transnational economic powers that rule the market govern, while the government manages. The end of politics—the only politics is the economy—and the end of the nation state, tariffs, and national currencies. We are not claiming that, in the past, politics and economics were separate and independent realities. Since the post-war Keynesian period, State and Capital have acted symbiotically, based on the existence of national labor markets and protected national capitalisms. This merger, assisted by trade unionism and the working class parties, assumed the form of "the Welfare State", "the heart of modern European civilization", if we are to believe the journalist from *Le Monde*, Ignacio Ramonet: pensions, health insurance, unemployment insurance, the right to education, laws protecting the rights of labor, etc. And this is the heart that globalization is trying to tear out by establishing an international labor market and demanding reductions in government spending, which amounts to a demand for a minimal state. Even with regard to questions of public order, the emphasis is on private police forces. It is therefore not at all surprising that, confronted by this modern capitalist anarchism, those whose power is derived from the state—politicians, trade union officials or other intermediaries, such as environmentalists or NGOs—or who have preserved a less degraded status as workers thanks to its laws—civil servants or the old working class in process of liquidation, that is, the retirees—have experienced a profound nostalgia for the state and advocate, if not a return to the idyllic conditions of consumption and enjoyment of power of the previous period of capitalism, the nationalist period, at least a form of globalization that respects the most important elements of those conditions, by way of an agreement with a state towards which they stand in the relation of clients and which they do not want to see reduced. The function of the modern state, however, is to defend the external conditions of the capitalist mode of production precisely against the attacks of the workers, rather than to protect the workers against the attacks of the capitalist mode of production. This, let us say, workers aristocracy feels as if, as they say, it is wearing two hats. Its members are simultaneously workers and minority shareholders. They work and combat the reduction in value of their only "capital". Their interests are separate and distinct from those of the rest of the dispossessed and that is why their struggle—the trade union struggle, and its obtuse statism—cannot be the struggle of all. If it were to manifest its power convincingly it might be taken seriously by the rest of the wage workers, but why stop just at the culminating moment of the struggle? Why impose the sordid arguments of survival? These questions will be answered with another question: What would they do if they were victorious? If they do not know or do not want to answer, it is better to negotiate and stage a diversion with simulacra of combat, and in the end, be content with what they give you.

One of the aspects of any important strike of the past that was of most concern to the class conscious workers was that of information, which they undertook to organize with autonomous

zeal to counteract the disinformation or the silence of the mainstream media. Now, these same media are instead the primary mouthpieces of the strikes and their best guardians. Their function remains the same, that of concealing reality by presenting a substitute reality, but whereas in the past this involved hiding the existence of the class struggle, now that there is no proletariat of any significance, their function is to conceal its non-existence. If in the past the media staged its invisibility, now it stage-manages its spectacle. In societies ruled by modern conditions of production a strike is not a strike if it is not announced on television. The pamphlet and the poster are no longer in evidence. The general strike only exists as a spectacle and its organization is not so much the responsibility of the trade union apparatus as of the communications media. They call the strike, they cover its progress and they put the period on the end of it outside the doors of the meeting halls. Here only actors who know their parts are permitted: the leaders are realists; the strikers, responsible; the authorities, earnestly seeking dialogue; the demands of the workers, just; the slogans, moderate; the pickets, informative; and finally, the uncontrollables, regrettable. The ideal would be for demonstrations to be covered just like, for example, the major events in the lives of the royal family. When they have already successfully exiled the entire population from reality, the most real reality is the spectacle itself. "To make shame more shameful still by making it public" is today a meaningless slogan, because once the real is no longer perceived, nothing has any consequences; making something public is just so much noise. All reference points have been lost and indifference to reality prevails. Communication is only possible as an illegal, anti-spectacular act, carried out between those who are outside of the law.

After everything we have said, someone may ask: Are workers struggles legitimate? Are they worth the trouble? There can be no objection to the continuation of workers struggles, especially if they dispense with intermediaries and avoid the nets of the media and legal arbitration. The power of a conflict can be measured by the system's efforts to conceal or to silence it. Boycotting the communications media is a guarantee of effectiveness and its opposite, a proof of innocuousness. The problem, however, consists in the fact that the labor question no longer constitutes the core of the social question and, as a result, struggles in this domain do not necessarily proceed according to plan: they do not supersede their condition. Wage labor has to be considered as a harmful phenomenon, just like pollution, adulterated food or the greenhouse effect, so destructive that it even leads to addiction, and every struggle on its terrain must be, in order to go to the heart of the matter, a struggle against wage labor, that is, the struggle against wage labor and the social system based on the wage relation must be an implicit feature of its critique. It has to be an anti-economic and anti-state struggle. It must be a form of sabotage. Just as insubordination is an act of sabotage against the army or squatting is an act of sabotage against private property. Sabotage is the tactic for our times.

Is it not true, however, that the thirty-five hour week and the European Summit on Employment resulted directly from workers protests? These political measures did not create any jobs, any more than the forty-hour week or part-time labor contracts. It was all a public relations stunt. It just means that the statist faction of the party of order is victorious in France and Italy, and that it is the duty of this faction to defend the process of eliminating jobs by fostering the illusion of their creation. This illusion has been called by various names: Market with State, New Social Contract, Market Socialism, etc. Without exception, however, the measures that are supposed to bring us closer to these "utopias" have led to increases in overtime, off-the-books work and wage reductions, all carried out to the tune of the song, *Lavorare meno per lavorare tutti* ["Work less so that everyone works"—Translator's note].

The end of the class struggle is not the end of history; we face the paradoxical situation of an acceleration of the historical process that is being driven by anti-historical social forces. History has been obscured. In less than two decades, the classes, the parties that claimed to represent them and the social terrain itself have been vaporized. The same process has caused society to become a basket case and revolt, invisible. We get the impression that history has stopped, that things happen without anything really happening. Nothing, however, is really taking place; all that is seen is pure representation and spectacle, and what takes place in reality is not seen. For the condition *sine qua non* of reality in the society of the spectacle is secrecy. The real workers struggles began when the strikes ended; when a spectacle comes to an end, however, it is completely finished. Until the next one comes. Domination has set itself the task of producing the typical individuals of mass society, isolated, amorphous and manipulable, displaying the behavior to be expected from creatures in captivity, who together comprise a resigned majority, unified thanks to the spectacle, within which rebellion is nullified. There is only one way to put an end to it: to acquire the determination to oppose it, to think that something better is possible. But this is a eminently individual decision and, by not respecting the rules of the spectacle, a criminal one as well. In this sense the rebel finds himself in a position similar to that of the Soviet dissident within the Stalinist system. The definitive solution will require many people to say no, but the road to that conclusion has to begin one individual at a time. And “any man more right than his neighbors constitutes a majority of one already” (Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience”).

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